Fascinating Journey of Rare Fairbury Documents

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I have now researched and written over 360 articles about Fairbury area history. I am running out of ideas for new history stories. A few weeks ago, I was driving from Germantown Hills back to Fairbury on Route 24. I was thinking of some new stories to write about while I was driving.

I then got the idea for another story about John Virgin, one of Fairbury's most prominent early citizens. I knew I had already written one story about him, but I figured I could write another because he led such an interesting life.

When I arrived at my office in Fairbury, I went to my desktop computer to record the idea of writing another John Virgin story. Before I made the entry in my spreadsheet, I checked my email. There was a new email from a woman in Washington State, Betsy Howell, who wanted to send me a big box of John Virgin family-related items!

She sent me a medium-sized grocery box packed full of John Virgin-related materials by U.S. Mail. These materials will be added to the holdings of the Fairbury Echoes Museum after they have all been analyzed.

With the help of Betsy Howell from Washington, we determined how this box survived despite containing materials that date back to before the Civil War. This story starts with the death of John Virgin in 1900 in Fairbury. When John died, his wife and two daughters survived him.

One of these two daughters, Minnie Alice Virgin, had married Addison Cooley in 1892 in Fairbury. They moved to the state of Washington, and in 1897, John Virgin Cooley, the only grandchild of John Virgin, was born in Spokane, Washington. Around the time John Virgin died in 1900, Addison and Minnie Cooley moved back to Fairbury with their two-year-old son, John Virgin Cooley.

By the time of the 1910 U.S. Census, John Virgin's widow, Serepta "Jennie" Virgin, had relocated to San Bernardino County, California. John Virgin's widow was 67, and she lived with her 25-year-old daughter, Daisy Dean Virgin. Serepta Virgin took her box of family-related items from Fairbury to California.

Daughter Minnie A. Cooley remained in Fairbury with her husband and 12-year-old son John Virgin Cooley. Fifty-year-old Addison Cooley was employed as a paper hanger in Fairbury. They lived on Chestnut Street.

In 1917, America entered World War I. Seventeen-year-old John Virgin Cooley enlisted in the Navy in San Pedro, California. He served in the submarine fleet during World War I, operating in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

In 1920, John Virgin's daughter, Daisy Dean Virgin, married Hal Smith in San Bernardino County, California. Hal was 50 and Daisy was 40 when they married. They had no children.

In the 1920 Census, Serepta Virgin was 76 years old and lived with her daughter, Daisy Dean Virgin, in San Bernardino County until Daisy got married. The Cooley family resided in Fairbury in 1920, living on East Chestnut Street. This family included Addison Cooley, 57, Minnie Cooley, 52, and their son John Virgin Cooley, age 22.

Also in the 1920 Census, Elizabeth Scouler lived with her parents in Fairbury. In 1927, she married John Virgin Cooley. By 1927, Addison and Minnie Cooley had moved to San Bernardino County. John V. Cooley was 29 and Elizabeth Scouler was 28 when they got married at his parents' ranch house in San Bernardino County.

By 1927, all of John Virgin's surviving family was living in San Bernardino County. In 1930, Hal Smith, husband of Daisy Dean Virgin, died at the age of 60. Widow Daisy Dean Smith moved in with her mother. Hal Smith and Daisy Dean Virgin were only married for 10 years.

In 1935, John Virgin's widow, Serepta Jane "Jennie" McDowell–Virgin, died in San Bernardino County at the age of 93. Since John Virgin Cooley was the only surviving grandchild of John Virgin, the box of family-related items from the John Virgin family was likely given to him in California.

After her mother died in 1935, Daisy Dean Virgin lived alone until she died in 1945 at the age of 68.

In 1936, Addison Cooley, husband of Minnie Alice Virgin, died in San Bernardino County at the age of 73. His widow, Minnie Cooley, continued to live alone until she died in 1955 at the age of 86.

In the early 1940s, John Virgin Cooley was in the trucking and hay business in the San Bernardino County area. In 1944, he became the Superintendent of the Park and Farm Department for the City of Ontario, California.

In the 1950 Census, John Virgin Cooley continued to live with his wife, Elizabeth. He was 52 and she was 51 when the Census was taken. In May of 1954, John V. Cooley married his second wife, Florence Riley, in Las Vegas. They continued to live in the same area and started taking vacations to a cabin they owned in Wyoming.

John Virgin Cooley's first wife died in 1957 at the age of 58. In 1960, John V. Cooley retired from his position as park superintendent. In 1964, John V. Cooley and his second

wife moved from San Bernardino County, California, to Lakeside, Montana. The unincorporated area of Lakeside is next to Flathead Lake, just south of Kalispell, Montana. John Virgin Cooley took the box of John Virgin's family items from California to Montana.

In 1978, John Virgin Cooley died at the age of 80 near Kalispell, Montana. His second wife apparently kept the box of John Virgin's family-related materials after he died.

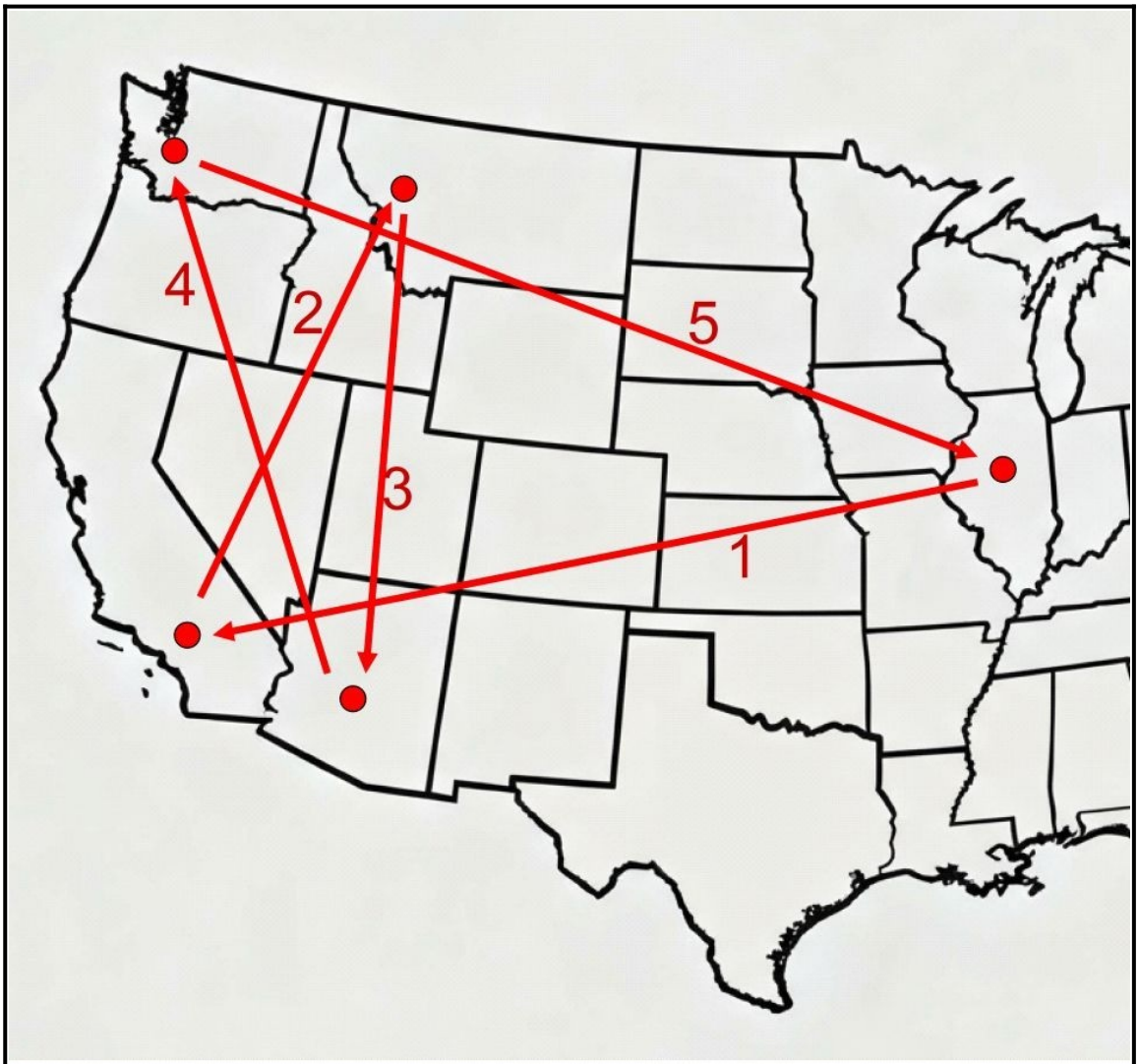
In 1993, John Virgin's second wife, Florence Riley, married Harold Dunning in Arizona. Mr. Dunning was a widower who had been married for 56 years and had two daughters. Harold was 83 and Florence was 80 when they got married. The box of John Virgin's family-related materials got moved to Arizona.

Just about two years after they were married, Florence Riley, John Virgin Cooley's second wife, died at the age of 82 in Arizona. The box of John Virgin's family-related materials stayed with her husband, Harold Dunning, in Arizona.

In 2002, Harold Dunning died in Arizona at the age of 92. One of his two daughters, after his death, cleaned out his house and found a box of John Virgin family-related items. She thought it contained a lot of rare and interesting items, so she saved the box and took it back to her home in Seattle, Washington. Through a friend of a friend, she gave the box to Betsy Howell of Port Townsend, Washington, because Betsy was researching her great-great-grandfather, who had served in the 72nd Illinois Infantry during the Civil War. After having the box of John Virgin family-related items for about 12 years, Betsy contacted the Fairbury Echoes Museum and then shipped the box from Washington to Fairbury.

The box of John Virgin's family-related materials made a fantastic journey from Fairbury to California, Montana, Arizona, Washington, and back to Fairbury. Many thanks go to Betsy Howell for contacting the Fairbury Echoes Museum and for shipping the box of rare historical items back to Fairbury.

Once the box of John Virgin's family-related items has been analyzed, we will likely have several more stories about the interesting life of early Fairbury citizen John Virgin and his wife, Serepta Jane "Jennie" McDowell.



Route that box of John Virgin box of family-related materials took from leaving Fairbury around 1910 and returning back to Fairbury in 2025.